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PUBLIC LANDS: Dicks, Moran wants 1M acres in Alaska off-limits to hardrock mining (Thursday, April 22, 2010)

Noelle Straub, E&E reporter

The current and former leaders of the House Interior Appropriations Subcommittee want the Interior Department to keep hardrock mining off limits in Alaska's Bristol Bay watershed over concerns it could harm one of the country's most productive fisheries.

Chairman Jim Moran (D-Va.) and former Chairman Norm Dicks (D-Wash.) sent a letter this week to Bureau of Land Management Director Bob Abbey asking that the current prohibition on hardrock mining in the region be maintained until further analyses are completed.

In question is 1.1 million acres of BLM land covered in a resource management plan for the bay completed late last year. While mineral development was barred on the land for more than three decades because of unresolved land claims, the management plan finalized just two months before President George W. Bush left office recommended opening the lands for leasing.

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar would still have to follow the plan's recommendation to revoke existing land withdrawals that are currently protecting the lands before mining companies or other development interests could begin making claims.

The area includes land adjacent to the Nushagak and Kvichak rivers, two of the most productive wild salmon rivers in the world, the lawmakers said. The region's sport, commercial and subsistence fisheries generate about \$440 million annually and provide 12,500 jobs, they added.

Saying the management plan "unnecessarily jeopardizes a world-class fishery and sporting destination," the appropriators also asked that BLM supplement the plan and analyze an alternative to ensure the fishery's long-term health.

"I am convinced that the BLM can produce and implement a land use plan for Bristol Bay that will generate economic opportunities while also conserving sporting and indigenous traditions for future generations," they wrote.

The letter echoes one sent last year by more than 300 sportsmen and wildlife groups asking Salazar to withdraw the bay area from new mining development (E&ENews PM, Aug. 26, 2009).

BLM spokeswoman Celia Boddington said the agency is currently reviewing the letter from the two lawmakers. "We take their comments very seriously," she said.

BLM officials in the past have maintained that the recommendation follows a careful deliberative process and would open only a sliver of Bristol Bay's public lands to mining (Land Letter, July 23, 2009).

The lands covered in the plan are close to the proposed Pebble Mine, a giant gold, copper and molybdenum deposit on state lands. Environmentalists have worked to block Pebble Mine amid fears it could lead to the industrialization of Bristol Bay at the cost of its pristine watershed.

The Obama administration recently announced that Bristol Bay will be kept off limits to offshore oil and gas drilling because of its fisheries, tourism and environmental values.

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